

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

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C O N F I D E N T I A L QUEBEC 0106

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, CA
SUBJECT: WILL THE REFERENDUM BE A DEFEAT OR A POSTPONEMENT?

REF: QUEBEC 0105

1. POLLING EXPERT MAURICE PINARD'S CONCLUSIONS (REFTEL),
BASED ON HIS ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS OF POLLS TAKEN OVER PAST
10-15 YEARS, TEND CONFIRM MY OWN LESS SCIENTIFICALLY SUSTAINED
IMPRESSIONS THAT SUPPORT FOR PARTI QUEBECOIS AND FOR THE
CONSTITUTIONAL OPTIONS IT FAVORS HAS DECLINED SIGNIFICANTLY
SINCE REACHING A ZENITH SHORTLY AFTER THE PARTY'S ELECTION
VICTORY IN NOVEMBER 1976. AS WE COMMENTED JUST PRIOR TO THE
LAST ELECTION, THE PROBABLE STATE OF THE ECONOMY OVER THE NEXT
FEW YEARS HARDLY MADE THE ELECTION WORTH WINNING. IT NOW APPEARS
THIS PREDICTION MAY HAVE BEEN PROPHETIC. AS PINARD SO CLEARLY
POINTS OUT, THERE IS A CLOSE CORRELATION BETWEEN SAGGING
ECONOMIC CONDITIONS AND DECLINING SUPPORT FOR THE PQ.

2. MY EARLIER CONVICTION THAT THE PQ, FROM ITS OWN POINT OF VIEW,
CAME TO POWER ONE ELECTION TOO SOON SEEMS TO BE CONFIRMED.
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THE QUEBECOIS, WHO HAVE HISTORICALLY BASED THEIR SURVIVAL ON A
CAREFUL HEDGING OF BETS, ARE UNLIKELY TO EMBARK ON ADVENTURES
INTO THE UNKNOWN IN THE MIDDLE OF THE MOST SERIOUS ECONOMIC CRISIS
THAT CANADA HAS KNOWN SINCE BEFORE WORLD WAR II.
HAD THE PQ COME TO POWER DURING MORE PROSPEROUS TIMES, THE
QUEBECOIS MIGHT HAVE BEEN MORE WILLING TO FOLLOW THEIR
UNDOUBTEDLY STRONG NATIONALIST INSTINCTS AND TAKE A GAMBLE

ON THE POTENTIAL ECONOMIC COSTS. FORTUNATELY FOR CANADA, THE PQ SEEMS TO HAVE PEAKED PREMATURELY.

3. IMPLICATIONS OF THEIR PLIGHT HAVE CERTAINLY PERCOLATED UP TO PQ MINISTERIAL RANKS. THIS PROBABLY EXPLAINS THEIR SUDDEN BURST OF MODERATION, AS WELL AS LEVESQUE'S NEW FOUND ABILITY TO IMPOSE RESTRAINT UPON SUCH FIRE-BREATHING ZEALOTS AS DR. LAURIN AND LOUIS O'NEILL. ON BASIS OF EVIDENT DECLINE IN SUPPORT, LEVESQUE NOW IS FACED WITH HOBSON'S CHOICE OF CALLING REFERENDUM AS SOON AS PRACTICABLE AFTER FEDERAL ELECTIONS ANTICIPATED FOR THIS SPRING, OR OF DELAYING REFERENDUM GAMBLING THAT FEDERAL GOVERNMENT WILL AGAIN MAKE BLUNDER COMPARABLE IN EMOTIVE FORCE TO FAMOUS AIR CONTROLLERS LANGUAGE IMBROGLIO OF TWO YEARS PAST.

4. SOME OF MOST ASTUTE OBSERVERS HERE ARE CONVINCED LEVESQUE WILL OPT FOR FIRST OF ABOVE ALTERNATIVES. THEY REASON THAT HE MIGHT BETTER CUT LOSSES BY GETTING REFERENDUM OUT OF WAY AS SOON AS POSSIBLE AND CONSECRATE REMAINING PERIOD BEFORE HE MUST CALL ANOTHER ELECTION TO WOOING VOTERS. BY DEEMPHASIZING SEPARATISM AND CONCENTRATING ON PROVIDING GOOD GOVERNMENT, THEY REASON, HE HAS BETTER CHANCE TO WIN NEXT ELECTION WITH THE FURTHER POSSIBILITY OF HOLDING A FUTURE REFERENDUM UNDER MORE PROPITIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES DURING A SECOND TERM. SUCH A COURSE OF ACTION IN FACT MAY SEEM ATTRACTIVE TO MANY PQ MILITANTS WHO WILL RECALL THAT THE PQ SUCCESSFULLY FOLLOWED A SIMILAR STRATEGY AFTER ITS CONFIDENTIAL

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STUNNING DEFEAT IN 1973, AN ELECTION WHICH HAD MUCH OF THE CHARACTER OF AN INDEPENDENCE REFERENDUM. SHIFTING GEARS IN 1976, THEY DOWN-PLAYED INDEPENDENCE WITH THEIR REFERENDUM PLOY, EMPHASIZING GOOD GOVERNMENT WHILE EXPLOITING THE WIDE UNPOPULARITY OF THE BOURASSA GOVERNMENT. SUCH A STRATEGEM, HOWEVER, MAY NOT BE EASILY REPEATED NOW THAT THE PQ ARE THE GOVERNMENT AND HAVE THEMSELVES SUFFERED A SERIOUS DECLINE IN POPULARITY. MOREOVER, SHOULD CLAUDE RYAN BECOME LIBERAL LEADER, AS HE ALMOST CERTAINLY WILL, THEY WILL FACE A FORMIDABLE OPPONENT WHO HAS STRONG QUEBEC NATIONALIST CREDENTIALS OF HIS OWN.

5. DELAYING THE REFERENDUM IN THE HOPE THAT THEY MIGHT CATCH THE CREST OF SOME MIGHTY EMOTIONAL WAVE WHICH THEY COULD RIDE TO INDEPENDENCE SEEMS AN EVEN LESS PROMISING PROSPECT. HAVING ONCE SUFFERED THE CONSEQUENCES OF LEAVING THE STORE IN THE HANDS OF INCOMPETENTS WHILE HE WENT SCUBA DIVING WITH CASTRO, TRUDEAU IS UNLIKELY RELAX HIS GRIP AGAIN. MOREOVER, HE NOW HAS BEADY-EYED MARC LALONDE TO SERVE AS OVERSEER IN OTTAWA ON CONSTITUTIONAL QUESTIONS. THUS, FEDS UNLIKELY GIVE LEVESQUE READY MADE REFERENDUM ISSUE. SHOULD REFERENDUM BE DELAYED AND LOST, MOST OBSERVERS, INCLUDING PINARD, NOW BELIEVE THE PROLONGED PERIOD OF UNCERTAINTY AND CONCENTRATION ON

INDEPENDENCE ISSUE WOULD VIRTUALLY ASSURE PQ ELECTION DEFEAT.

6. AT THIS POINT, THE PQ'S IMMEDIATE PROSPECTS DO NOT SEEM BRIGHT. HOWEVER, POLITICS IS A MOST UNCERTAIN GAME. OTHERS, INCLUDING THE PRESENT FEDERAL PRIME MINISTER, HAVE RECOVERED FROM SEEMINGLY HOPELESS MID-TERM MALAISE. WHATEVER HAPPENS IN TERMS OF A REFERENDUM VOTE OR IN THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION, THE LONGER TERM DANGER OF SEPARATISM WILL PERSIST AS LONG AS THE DEEPLY ROOTED FEELINGS OF ETHNIC GRIEVANCE REMAIN. IT WOULD BE TRAGIC IF THE PQ'S PRESENT DIFFICULTIES ENCOURAGED A RETURN TO COMPLACENCY AMONG THE ANGLO-CANADIAN MAJORITY. ONLY WIDE RANGING CONSTITUTIONAL CONCESSIONS, COUPLED WITH A CHANGE IN ATTITUDES TOWARDS FRANCOPHONES IS LIKELY, IN THE END, TO DESTROY THE CANCER OF SEPARATISM IN QUEBEC.
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